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Pioneer of Mexican commerce: account of the trials and tribulations of James Baird who blazed a path for progress across the Mexican Border

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The Pioneer of Mexican Commerce

Being an Account of the Trials and Tribulations of James Baird Who Blazed a Path for Progress Across the Mexican Border.

IN these days when commercial intercourse between the United States and Mexico rests upon the firm foundation of mutual friendship and punctilious international understanding, the divers difficulties with which the efforts of the early pioneer promoters of trade between the two nations were fraught, are almost forgotten.

Three-quarters and even half a century ago, the tradesman organized a retinue of courageous dare-devils and stealthily sought to smuggle his wares over the border. If his venture was successful, his profits were great; if he was apprehended by the Mexican authorities, the dungeon was the best he got—summary execution, in military style, was his usual portion.

Today, the debonnair drummer, that irrepressible apostle of American progress, merely packs his case of samples, takes apartments in a sumptuously appointed Pullman, wakes up in Mexico and gets the glad hand from his admiring customer—and usually a fat order to make him happy.

Things have changed mightily during the half century everywhere—both in the United States and Mexico—but in no instance has the transformation been more remarkable and complete than in the attitude of commercial Mexico toward commercial United States. Mexico likes the things our manufacturers make, and her merchants like to buy them, because, thanks to the tariff, they can get them cheaper than can even the merchant in the country where they are made. But this agreeable state of affairs did not always exist. That it does now exist, the manufacturer owes an everlasting debt of gratitude to a pioneer trader who blazed the way through a wilderness of hardships, and finally met his death for the sake of the cause, nearly a hundred years ago.

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This pioneer was James Baird, a native of Pennsylvania. He was born in the little town of Carlisle, that state, in July, 1767. He was a blacksmith by trade, and an explorer, an exploiter, by inclination. In his early manhood, he lived at Fort Duquesne, where the boy, Colonel George Washington, as an emissary of the British General Braddock, in the year 1754, had two horses shot from under him and got four bullet holes through his coat and then came out unscathed in a heated brush with the French. There Baird became an

intimate associate of Lieutenant Zebulon Pike, who afterwards made his name immortal by the discovery of the highest peak of the Rocky Mountains, which now bears his name.

In 1810, seven years after Thomas Jefferson bought half of that portion of the United States which now lies west of the Mississippi River from the French for the mere pittance of $15,000,000, thereby perpetrating the biggest real estate coup in history, Baird saw his opportunity in this new possession and moved to St. Louis, then a frontier trading post. Shortly after his arrival there, he met Lieutenant Pike, who had just returned from an exploring jaunt into that section now geographically known as Louisiana and Arkansas. From his friend Pike, Baird learned of wonderful opportunities for wealth that lay in trade with Mexico.

Just here it should be stated that Mexico was a Spanish province, New Spain it was called, and the mother nation, ambitious to reserve for and to herself whatever benefits that might arise from trade in her province, placed a stringent embargo upon trade with the United States. About this time, however, a revolution was in progress in Mexico, with the priest and scholar, Hidalgo, at its head, one of the results of which, it was anticipated, would be the removal of this embargo. Although the revolution failed, for the time being, and the priest, Hidalgo, was executed, word reached St. Louis that it had been successful, and in accordance with this information, Baird forthwith organized a trading expedition to invade Mexico. With a great train of pack mules laden with merchandise to the value of at least $100,000, and a band of a dozen assistants, helpers and an interpreter, Baird left St. Louis late in April, 1812, following the course of the Missouri River to about where Kansas City now stands, then turning in a southwesterly direction, marked out a route which, in later years, became widely known as "The Santa Fe Trail." Santa Fe, the oldest Spanish town in what was then North Mexico, was the destination. In due course of time, having mastered the many hardships of the thousand-mile pilgrimage, the expedition reached Santa Fe safely.

Baird and his friends were well acquainted with that condition of things which, under Spanish rule, would have made their open and uncovered entry into a Spanish province almost impossible, or a dare-devil play with fate, at least. They knew that Spanish laws prohibited the entrance of all foreigners, English, French, as well as Americans, on any pretense. But they were laboring under the impression that the revolution had been successful, and that these obstacles had all been removed. Therefore their surprise can be imagined when, promptly upon their arrival at Santa Fe, they were seized as spies, thrown into prison and their rich cargo confiscated. Baird, together with two of his companions, Samuel Chambers of

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"Shooting the Shoots" in Corpus Christi Bay

Pennsylvania and Robert McKnight of New Orleans, were shortly removed to Chihuahua, Mexico, where they were incarcerated in solitary confinement in an old cathedral, which had been improvised to serve as a prison by the Spanish oppressors. Peter Baum, of Kentucky, was shot at Santa Fe. Of the others the record is silent, but inasmuch as they were never heard of again, it is reasonable to suppose that they shared the fate of Baum.

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In due course of time, the ill fortune of Baird's expedition reached the ears of his friends at St. Louis. Through the Federal government at Washington, tremendous pressure was shortly brought to bear upon Spain to secure the release of the captives. But the mills of government authority and prerogative, both republican and monarchical, then as now, ground slowly.

In 1817, John Scott, delegate to congress from Missouri territory, submitted a report of the incident to John Quincy Adams, then secretary of state, praying for Federal intervention in behalf of Baird and his followers. Secretary Adams laid the matter before the Spanish Ambassador at Washington, Luis de Onis, and asked that urgent steps be taken to liberate Baird and his men, whom he charged had been unlawfully imprisoned. The individual last named leisurely communicated with his majesty's government, who, in turn, leisurely referred the question to the Viceroy of New Spain, the head of government in Mexico. A year went by and no action was taken by the Spanish govenment. Baird's friends waxed wroth at the delay, and in consequence thereof, in April, 1818, a resolution was offered and passed in the House of Representatives, asking information of the authorities on the subject. This resolution brought forth a special message to congress from James Monroe, then president of the United States, in which the progress of the case up to that time was reviewed. The message contained copies of all the numerous communications that had passed between the two governments bearing on the matter. The report was evidently not to the liking of congress, for it was laid upon the table without action or comment. It failed to show any satisfactory progress, such as the resolution had contemplated.

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Meantime, things politically in Mexico were in a state of fomentation. Hidalgo, the moving spirit of the previous revolution, was a Catholic priest. When he had been executed, Spain called a new junta which passed certain laws unfavorable to the revolutionists, and made sweeping changes in things that concerned the priesthood. This caused the church to side with the revolutionists. Then came a second revolution, and the Mexicans were victorious. An empire was formed and General Iturbide, a patriot, was made emperor.

Iturbide doubtless thought it would be to his interest to "stand

in" with that rapidly growing nation that bordered his land on the north, and promptly, in response to representations, in 1821, released Baird and his two companions from the old cathedral at Chihuahua, where they had been rigorously confined for nine years.

Immediately upon their release, Baird's two companions, Chambers and McKnight, set out for the United States. McKnight was killed by Indians while crossing the Arkansas River in what is now Western Kansas. Chambers made good his escape, and finally reached St. Louis.

Baird, hardy exploiter that he was, desired to familiarize himself

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE EXPERTS INSPECTING THE GARDENS AT LA PARRA RANCH

with conditions in Mexico, and remained there for that purpose several months after liberation. He eventually returned to St. Louis, making the long and dangerous journey by himself.

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When Baird arrived at St. Louis he learned that, fearing an uprising among the Indians at the outbreak of the war of 1812, his family, with the exception of one son, had returned to Pittsburg, whither he hastened to join them. The trade outlook in Mexico so impressed him with its roseate possibilities, however, that he soon returned to St. Louis, and in conjunction with Chambers, who, with

PHOTO BY WHEELUS

A Southwest Texas Cotton Gin.

himself, was the sole survivor of the former ill-fated venture, organized another expedition.

This second expedition left St. Louis in the fall of 1822, and followed practically the same course as before. A few weeks later, while it was attempting to ford the Arkansas River in the throes of an awful blizzard, all of the animals, horses, oxen and all, were lost, and Baird and his followers were compelled to winter on an island in the river.

Next spring the expedition proceeded and finally reached Mexico. The entire stock of merchandise, valued at probably $150,000, was sold and the traders set out for home in the winter of 1826. The winter was a severe one, and Baird, his rugged frame and indomitable will breaking under the terrible strain, sickened and died. But he had lived to witness the successful culmination of the first trading expedition from the United States to Mexico. News of his death did not reach his family until two years later.

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Baird's son and namesake, who did not accompany the family when it returned to Pittsburg at the outbreak of the War of 1812, became a member of Stephen F. Austin's colony, which came to Texas in 1821. This son was a soldier in the Texas army in the war for Texas independence, and afterwards sheriff of Fort Bend County, Texas, for two terms.

Captain James B. Thompson, now an honored citizen of Corpus Christi, Texas, is a grandson of Baird, the trader. It is to him that the writer is indebted for the interesting account of the career of his illustrious progenitor, the path-finder of American commercial progress in Mexico.

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"A QUESTIONABLE HONOR."

An Irish political club had just organized and elected a president, two directors and a secretary. Clancy got up and remarked:

"We have now elected a president, two directors and a secretary, but what we most need about this hall is a couple of cuspidors."

A brother member then took the floor and said:

"I think Mr. Clancy's suggestion about the cuspidors is a good one, and I move that we nominate him for one of them."